

## **Poverty as a Formative Discourse in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*; The Representation of Poverty in Nigeria as the Referent Society of the Text**

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### **Abstract**

African literature has an enduring propensity for social and political commitment. African literary texts reflect and refract the socio-political events in African societies. African literature is on the third phase of its three stages: first, it was a tool for celebrating the heroic grandeur of the African past; second, it was later used for anti-colonial struggle; third, and presently, it is being employed as a veritable weapon for depicting the postcolonial disillusionment felt in all corners in Africa, and in this, a nexus is drawn between the aesthetic of the novel and the social experiences that nurtures the literary consciousness of the writer. This affirms Achebe's claim that any African writer who shuns the social and political matters of contemporary Africa is at the risk of being irrelevant. Therefore, African literature is always tied to the experiences of the peoples of Africa. This project surveys the literature and assesses the magnitude, persistence and depth of poverty and inequality in Nigeria, using Festus Iyayi's *Violence*.

**Keywords: Poverty, Formative discourse, Festus Iyayi, Nigeria**

## Introduction

Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, whose contributing factors include unemployment, income inequality and corruption. The World Bank in *The World Development Report 2000/2002* sums up the various dimensions of poverty to include lack of opportunity, lack of empowerment and lack of security. The window of opportunity remains closed to the common people, rendering them dormant in society. Thus this social incapacitation limits the choices they would have to make and their lack of security makes them vulnerable to exploitation, diseases, violence and so on. In Africa, widespread and severe poverty is a brazen reality experienced in lack of food, cloth, shelter, education, security and other entitlement programmes.

Gavin Jones writes that it is

Only in imaginative literature can we fully understand the problems of poverty and inequality. This statement may seem strange, counterintuitive at best. Surely poverty is a material condition, a position in the social structure. And literary texts: are they not aesthetic artifacts, retreating by their nature into the privacy of the imagination? Only in this retreat from the tactile and the statistical, I contend, can we approach the complexity of poverty as an ideological formation, or understand the inner life of being poor – the tangle web of emotion and behavior that gets brushed too easily from social study....Why is literature uniquely equipped to give us this lost language of poverty? There is something in the nature of literary language, its openness to contradiction and paradox, that attunes to the difficulty of

Indeed, literature is life and it provides critical insight about life. Thus a general opinion is that literature mirrors society, because literature relates to all aspects of society: political, economical, historical and social, exposing both open and secret truths. It is a medium of reflecting the contemporary issues of society—be it class struggle, leadership problems, matters of security or issues on national development. In fact, literature serves as a mirror of society or a channel through which the social, political, cultural and economic issues that ravage a given society are explored.

Surely, imaginative provides an insight into the problems posed by poverty. Explicating on this,

poverty as a category that hovers on the edge of social thought, that undercuts dominant ideologies of success, that is always being displaced by the privileging of cultural diversity over economic inequality. Literary analysis can show how the language used to describe the poor has a pronounced effect on how they are viewed, and hence on how the problem of poverty is dealt with in the public sphere. ('The Truths of Poverty in Fiction')

There is no doubt the relationship between literature and society is as close as to be virtually symbiotic, for it is practically impossible to discuss literature without making reference to society. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren stress the very close relationship between the two: Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation.

Indeed, many African writers have pursued different themes in their works of art. These themes include the relationship between modernity and tradition, individuality and collectivism, capitalism and socialism, cross-cultural conflicts, corruption, religious obsession and exploitation to mention but a few. Such African writers who felt that they had no option other than to incorporate socially relevant issues into their literary works by focusing on the shortcomings and

challenges of their societies include Achebe who looked at moral and political corruption in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*; Ngugi wa Thiong'o who depicted the negative effects of western religious incursion into Kenyan society in *The River Between*. Additionally, a group of politically committed literary artists whose radical ideological positions were explicit in their work include Sembene Ousmane, Alex La Guma, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nadine Gordimer and Festus Iyayi. For these writers, social relevance was not optional: it was the very basis of their work, and they brought a Marxist-oriented class analysis of society to bear upon their writing. In doing this, they conformed to Louis Althusser's notion of art as being 'to make us see', and what it allows us to see, what it forces us to see, is 'the ideology from which it is born' (qtd.in Bennet and Royle 132).

Of *Violence*, P Anawi writes,

... exposes the abject penury ... that constitutes the social reality of the majority of Nigerians. In language that is often vitriolic and stinging, Iyayi's

protagonists potently display his contempt for the rampant corruption that strangles contemporary Nigeria. This base depravity of the ruling class manifests itself in various forms and ultimately trickles down to the ruled class.... The real tragedy is that those of the ruled class are either forced or coerced to absorb their oppressor's abuse.... Violence usually connotes physical abuse, but in his first novel, *Violence*, Iyayi redefines it as a continual, demoralizing structure that eliminates hope, pride, self-esteem, health, and the ability to live independently....Iyayi's violence creeps into the corners of the pneuma of the lower classes, the have-nots, and renders them helpless against the socio-political machine powered solely by money, corruption and privilege.' ('Marxist Aesthetics')

Okojie examines Iyayi's portrayal of class inequalities, exploitation and corruption and its repercussion in *Violence*. She lauds the author for his courage in dissecting the neocolonial set-up in spite of the risks of harassment by the hierarchy ('The Concept of Violence'). Fatunde focuses on the similarity of Iyayi's stance as a novelist to that of Ngugi since both expose the nature of corruption, emphasizing its link with the system of exploitation ('Two African Writers'). In another essay he compares Iyayi's portrayal of the masses with Ouologuem's and posits that while the workers of Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* do not show the potential for liberation through struggle, Iyayi's works always 'face the future with determination' ('Images of Working People' 117). Tejumola Olaniyan focuses on Iyayi's new kind of literature and

discourse that is based on socialist realism (303).

This then means that any writer who deviates from the socio-political events of his/her clime will end up being insensitive because his/her work does not address issues at stake.

However, it needs be said that widespread and severe poverty is a reality in our world. It is a reality that depicts lack of food, clothes, education and other basic amenities. . Poverty is lack of job. Poverty is hunger, poor health, low education, low self-esteem, lack of adequate housing, lack of land, inability to cloth oneself/family, low economic status and, above all, denial of choices. Maduagwu concludes that poverty creates frustration, loss of hope/prospects and value for life, loss of meaning for life and purpose of living. It

also creates disillusionment about morality, poverty makes people compromise on moral values or abandon moral values completely (Maduagwu, *Alleviating Poverty in Nigeria*). Okafor stresses that the success or failure of any government is measured by the degree of attainment of human development or the level of poverty prevalent among the people (67). Thus, the real trouble has to do with such problems as minimum wages—especially wage labour—and lack of access to the education necessary for obtaining a better-paying job.

In this research, an effort is made to examine Festus Iyayi's representation of poverty in post-independence Nigerian state as reflected in his fiction *Violence*. This is premised on the awareness that there is always a close relationship between African literature and the social reality; that social reality in the novel under study being that the literature of Nigeria has remained obsessed with the plight of the underprivileged, exposing a group of people that lie beyond traditional

documentary sources. In doing this, Iyayi selects realistic details from ordinary life to chronicle the fate of an impotent silent majority. Iyayi presents a vision of life as brutish, with human concerns such as inequality largely fore-grounded in his novel. In consequence, the novel's thematic focus centres on the portrayal of the terrifying, the painful and a common insistence on postcolonial disillusionment. The novel also takes as its thematic focus the foregrounding of the exploitation of the masses, betrayal of public confidence, highly decadent and socially stratified society that breeds and nurtures exploitation and oppression of the less-privileged in society. Therefore, Iyayi acknowledges a poverty that is as aesthetically and culturally significant as it is socially and materially real. Combining Marxist theory with literary analysis, Iyayi masterfully brings poverty into mainstream critical idiom, thus validating Ahmad Aijaz's assertion that 'all Third-world texts are necessarily national allegories' (95)

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### **Marxism as an Ideological formation in *Violence***

The study is both qualitative and descriptive, with thematic analysis of the texts. Themes of poverty and corruption are adequately analysed. The methodology approach used for the effective analysis of this study is a blend of Marxist theory and socialist realism theory. This is because the Marxist theory views society (especially capitalist society) as politically locked down, hold the freedom of the people. The theory portrays the suffering of the masses in the literary texts and forms its analysis and viewpoint, stating that the masses suffer as a result of corruption and stratification which the ruling class seem to always ignore. The social realism theory falls in line with human concerns and perspectives.

Plausibly the referent society is Nigeria which is the setting of the novel under study. The use of Marxist and socialist approaches are justified as the novelist whose work shall be used as the data for analysis share the same ideological approach which is Marxism and Social Realism. Thus, Marxism, according to Balogun 'identifies social and economic factors as crucial denominators of relationship in the society.' (203). Johnson

opines that Marxism 'is a class-based socio-economic interpretation of human progress and development.' (45)

No doubt, Marx fought for the cause of the oppressed through his writing. He states in his writing that a society where capitalism rules cannot flourish socially and emotionally; this is because class struggle will always exist just for people to get out of poverty. According to Marxist theory, the society is structured in two layers: super-ordinate and subordinate. This structuration therefore categorises the bourgeoisie and the proletariat - the rich and the poor, respectively. This categorization creates a wide gap in society where some people have access to the basic necessities of life and live off the poor masses' sweat while the poor do not have the same opportunities.

Just as the proletariat need the literary world to expose the ills of the society- how the majority are oppressed, marginalized and exploited- the Marxist literary writers also need the oppressed and these set of people who suffer several societal injustices to act on the solutions being proffered in their literary works.

For Michael Lelvin

...two conditions were required for the proletariat to develop a revolutionary class consciousness: its own active resistance to capital and the intellectual support of a party organization. (qtd. in Jessop)

Having realized that literature should not be for just its aesthetics, but also used to touch the lives of the people especially the oppressed, many African writers now involve the Marxist style of writing in order to be able to change the deprecating African society. Balogun further observes that 'The interest of Marxist literature is to defend the cause of the oppressed. The Marxist critics believe in an egalitarian society where this ideal is stressed' (203).

Hence, Iyayi's novel, *Violence*, exposes the abject penury that constitutes the social reality of the majority of Nigerians, the referent society of the text. Set in Benin City, South-South Nigeria, a representative of other neocolonial African cities, it becomes an appropriate setting for exposing the injustices and suffering of the masses, who appear to be trapped in an endless cycle of distress and pain, or what Iyayi regards as violence, which is exploitation, brutalization and dehumanization of the masses by the system. The novel is a description of the nature and kinds of violence, as well as reactions to it. One understands the different

shades of suffering through the events involving the characters.

The novel revolves around, Idemudia, the protagonist, who is portrayed as a good citizen, husband and father, as well as a strong, enthusiastic, and industrious workman. His poverty is presented as a serious disadvantage, a 'crime' that impinges on his noble qualities, for it is depravity that propels him to change and abrogate his responsibilities. He becomes ashamed in the presence of his wife because he cannot fend for her and his son, whom he therefore sends to the village. He steals and becomes self-conscious, ashamed and alienated from his family and the economic and political system that gives him no chance to be a responsible citizen.

In all, the intentions of *Violence* are clearly visible in the way in which it conducts a class analysis of Nigerian society, revealing the way in which it fails to provide succour for its most vulnerable members, showing how the greed and covetousness of the elite is the direct cause of suffering and oppression

### Denial of Choices as a Consequence of Poverty

Every human being desires and values the same basic aspirations: clothing, good health and proper medical care, better shelter, improved diet, dreams and expectations, joys, quality education, high self-esteem, stable job and good savings, a desire to provide for the family, and general good living condition. The value of human dignity cannot be dissociated from these. But where the classes of human beings differ is in the near-impossible choices they often face. The impossible choices form the hallmark of poverty: endemic dilemmas and challenges whose solutions are out of reach, constituting horrible traps that make life more depressing. In these the poor feel negative, inferior, passive, hopeless and powerless, exposed to series of negative events, including illness, depression, eviction, joblessness and job loss, criminal victimization, exploitation and general life stress. These encapsulate the horrors and predicaments that keep people like Idemudia, Adisa, Osaro, Patrick, Richard, Omoifo, all the starved labourers at Iyaro in Festus Iyayi's *Violence* trapped in poverty, unable to break out.

With Idemudia, the problems of poverty are not just obvious but conspicuous. He is young and optimistic but lives perilously and

permanently close to the edge of crisis. He goes to bed in the nights, together with his wife, in empty stomach, with no hope of the next day's meal. He calculates he can manage some days without finding any paid work before he runs out of money – he always runs out of money and is greatly in debts. Their only son has been sent to live with his poor grandmother in the village, while they toggle it out with hunger and poverty in the city of Benin and, as it is, living without a choice in a miserable house with a leaky roof, a bed that 'talks' and doors that 'cry.' Yet, Idemudia must struggle to provide for a wife that stops him from going out unless he has provided her with the day's food. And his struggle for survival would lead to his exploitation wherein he, amongst his like, are drafted to unload 1500 bags of cement from three trailers into a warehouse, working mechanically but resolutely, each of the labourers thinking about money - just Five Naira – to quell the sharp pain of their hunger (*Violence* 34). His poverty leads to his exploitation. He almost loses his life from exhaustion and winds up spending days in the hospital and then even 100% of what he earned from that job could not pay his hospital bill. Adisa, his wife, finds herself in desperate situation needing money to eat and

to pay her husband's hospital bill. She compromises after some pressure and has an extra-marital affair with the Obofun for a One Hundred Naira consideration and cartons of expensive wine to sell.

Obviously, the painful conditions of living experienced by the couple are most telling in their dwelling-place, feeding and dressing, all

of which locate them in their social class. Certainly, Owode Street, where the deprived masses live in the novel, *Violence*, is used as an objective and concrete index of the characters and their material impoverishment. The residents of the street experience everything that negates joy and all other basic aspirations for a decent living:

The gutters were filled with heavy red water in which the frogs croaked hoarsely in the night. There also the flies, and because the flood was fresh, the mosquitoes flew about, disturbed. There were innumerable pools of water on the twisting, untared and uneven road.

In front of the houses along the street, people sat and watched the weather. Men and women, all jobless, sat on the long wooden benches, their backs against the rough mud walls. The children were mostly naked, and they were thin and had sores on their legs, from which they frequently drove the flies. Most of the people who walked along the street were barefooted and as the cars passed, some of them Mercedes Benz cars, they splashed the red muddy water on the people but drove on, carelessly, secure inside. (*Violence*, 69)

Additionally, for Idemudia and Adisa who are the representatives of the hopeless poor in the novel, their abode paints a picture of a gothic scene: Their single room contains a single wooden chair, a table, the cooking pots, the kerosene stove, the food cupboard, the water pot, the glasses broken at the edges, which they still use even more than newer ones; their sweeping broom, too short for comfort and getting shorter because the

rough floor cut them; their pillow wear patches in many places (206-210).

More over, it is not just economic growth that will defeat poverty. Simple improvements in health would make a big difference too. Several people die of diseases that are both preventable and curable. Nothing reveals the absurdity of a people's poverty than the fact that a good percentage of all deaths are

caused by simple causes. These deaths result simply from lack of good health facilities to provide the citizenry with the basic aspiration

for good health. In the novel, *Violence*, we are presented with lurid pictures of hospitals that are in piteous condition:

Even at that hour, the University hospital was crowded. It was a pitiable sight. So, many people were sick and in need of the doctor. The long benches were full. The porch outside was filled by patients who were able to stand. Some of the waiting patients coughed violently. Mothers who carried sick children moved agitatedly. The faces that waited there were grim, serious and preoccupied with worry (53)

Even so, the patients do not have any choice other than seek medical assistance from these hospitals that could pass for glorified dispensaries. These patients are haggard and distraught people with wrinkles and cracks all over, people who have been engaged by life in a terrible and fierce struggle and they have always come out of each bout worse and still more badly battered, yet they still struggle and aspire to keep their lean flames of life burning. Therefore, they have to stay on in the hospitals that do not have beds; hospitals where prescriptions are written out for patients and they are advised to go to chemist shop to get the drugs; hospitals where two patients share a bed, each with a strange sickness; hospitals where more deaths occur on a daily basis; hospitals where patients are turned away because nobody will be responsible for settling the expenses!; hospitals where drugs that could have saved

thousands from careless death are denied those who earnestly need them, and yet they are charged high bills for consultation and using the hospitals' dilapidated facilities - failure to pay up leads to one being held in in the hospital until the bill is paid; hospitals where two patients share a bed while many more slept on the floor. It was like a pigsty, this ward, swarming with the sick, as pit toilet swarm with flies. (54-108).

It is not say much that bad government plays a major role in keeping her citizens permanently poor. If Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy as 'government of the people, for the people and by the people' rightly applies in Africa the tearful question that Adisa and Patrick ask God as to His unfair treatment in making them unlucky and incapable of making possible choices would not arise. If the people have a say in how they are governed (participatory governance) and

officials are accountable to the people they serve (social accountability), poor people become aware of their power and the force their voices have when raised. Therefore, it is government unconcern for the piteous situation of the poor that keeps them permanently designated to the trenches and perpetually entrapped in poverty, for as much as Idemudia tries to extricate himself from the shackles of hardship and difficulty his efforts yield nothing because there are no actionable programmes set down by government to alleviate his suffering. Therefore, Idemudia's little earnings are spent on food only, with no amount earmarked for new cloth, decent accommodation and general good living condition that should form the better choices that individuals make. Thus *Violence* like many other postcolonial novels of disillusionment reflects the continuing cant, corruption, degeneration and frustration witnessed in Africa. The novel sums up Iyayi's concern for the prevalent social anomalies in postcolonial Nigerian state, and it is graphic demonstration of Iyayi's sympathy for the underprivileged members

of his society. His choice of this vision is unique, reflecting his awareness of people's predicament in the midst of abundant resources. The characters are presented in such a way that they signify the overwhelming disparity between the dominant, privileged exploiter class and the exploited. The poor characters in the novel constitute the class of people who groan under 'food crisis, deplorable mass poverty, decimating diseases and pervasive illiteracy' (Onimode 8). The novelist uses the daily experiences of these poor characters to harp on the helplessness of the masses in postcolonial African societies, thus indicting the government in the deplorable situation of the poor.

Indeed, Idemudia and his wife cannot afford the cost of good food because of the high financial involvement. But, that notwithstanding; they do not have a stable job that would have taken care of their needs and there is no hope of getting one. Since they need food to stay alive, what they get for food is below the standard that is the desire of decent living:

They were poor and ate anything next to grass. Last Christmas, she [Adisa] had bought and prepared a chicken that had died from an illness. She had specially looked for it because there had been no money (67).

If Idemudia's poverty is conspicuous there are other characters in the novel like Patrick and the other labourers whom poverty has defined their lives too. In order to provide for his family Patrick has to disagree with fellow workers who want to embark on strike to force their client to increase their wage. Of Patrick the narrator says,

Patrick had been out of any kind of work nearly six months. He didn't want to lose the job he had found, come what may. His wife was pregnant and failure to earn a few naira this month would be catastrophic. He needed money badly and a strike threatened the only source of hope he had. (266)

Poverty is about denial of choices and the poor are faced with many impossible choices they have to make every day. The common man rendered abstract and shadowy is living in a world of anonymity. The beggars in the novel for instance are sketched out in a society in which they think they are pariahs. They are frustrated and almost destroyed by poverty. They are entrapped in their painful and woeful world. They look forward to the simple and unvaried pleasures of life experienced by the well-to-do, but poverty limits the choices they have to make.

### **The Necessity of Action: Protest as Dialogue**

Of all the issues which can trigger protest, none is arguably more endemic than the inequitable relationship between the rich and the poor in a given society. It is, indeed the prototype of protest because most of the

issues that provoke protest are related to the question of what the relationship between different social classes is, and how it can be made to function on a more equitable level.

In *Violence*, Iyayi constructs a prevailing social condition and shows how it is designed to perpetuate inequity and injustice. Ultimately, the writer's argument is that no single individual is at fault; it is the system that makes extremes of wealth and poverty possible that is to blame. More specifically, the prevailing system of social relations is so distorted that the only way in which the rich and the poor can co-exist is through a state of perpetual aggression, or violence. Hence, the title of the novel *Violence* initially seems to reinforce the necessity of an existential action. The actions of the workmen—carrying out wholesome demonstration—reinforce the necessity of acting, not waiting. The desperate creative drama performed by the poor inmates of Ogbe Hospital in the face

of despair and their willful rebellion, while on one level seemingly futile, is on another level the action on which hope can be built. The state may intend to create lethargy, an impotent madness that saps any energy for resistance from the people, but when imbued with a sense of will, as the workmen do, it becomes an energizing force. Thus, protest against the ruling class is carried out by socially-marginalised men and women in society.

In *Violence* it is the upper class that stifles the zeal of the lower order, thus, so that the

‘The houses must go up faster. No standing about. Break reduced by thirty minutes. If you are not satisfied, you go, and we hire somebody else.... There will be Sunday work too.... Sunday is overtime but everyone must come.’ (*Violence* 239)

Grappling with severe economic deficit and grounded by crippling conditions of poverty, the labourers will, in the meantime, accept the exploitative tendencies of the representatives of the upper class: the Greek engineer and the client, Queen. But they definitely know the limit of servitude and exploitation. Thus when the Greek and Queen stipulate harsher work conditions and a very meager pay events take a different turn at the site. The workers plan to down tool. Placed between the devil and the deep blue sea, Queen, who has been issued a mandate by government to complete and hand over the

privileged class can only maintain its grip on the benefits it has only by ensuring that the poor, who wish to share them, are denied the opportunity to do so. The poor on the other hand, quickly realize that they have a narrow choice between a dehumanizing marginality and the forceful assertion of themselves in the articulation of their desires. Thus, we read about the quick dismissal of the wage workers at Queen’s construction site, and particularly observe the site engineer’s riot act to the men:

contract of building a low cost estate, resorts to both carrot and stick approach to get the job done or risk remitting huge sum to government, including serving a jail term. Idemudia, who has assumed the leadership of the workers’ group, who instigates the proposed strike to press home their demand for a better pay and resist harsh sanctions on the workers, is able to turn down romantic overtures and monetary inducement aimed at hampering the proposed industrial action by the workers. He says of Queen, ‘What does she take me for?.... I am poor but I can tell my right from my left’ (*Violence* 259).

*Violence* demonstrates the pervasiveness of violence in an exploiting economic structure. The working people, represented by Idemudia and others who gather at Iyaro Motor Park, are constantly looking for work. Here, people are forced to sell their labour power to the local bourgeoisie in order to survive. In most cases they are employed merely on a daily basis, so there is no job security. Since the surplus value created is to be shared between the local and the foreign masters, Idemudia and his comrades are grossly exploited as manual labourers in off-loading cement bags and as workers with building constructors (258). On the other hand, Adisa willingly submits to sexual humiliation in order to procure the money necessary for paying the husband's hospital bill. And thus the working people have to undertake often inhuman tasks to regain crumbs of surplus value which they themselves created.

Protest in this regard emerges as the only reasonable response to the exploitativeness and inhumanity of society. It is an unmistakable signal that the system of social relations which makes it impossible for the poor to get any justice against the rich can no longer continue. It is the unmistakable sign that the masses of the people will no longer accept the diminution of their humanity

because they do not have money. Violence is thus both an instrument and an outcome. It is the former because it represents the means by which the masses and their working-class vanguard will seek to interrogate existing power relations; it is the latter because it is what unremitting justice and exploitation inevitably lead to. As the title of Iyayi's novel, violence becomes the purest form of protest, the natural way for a mass of dispossessed people to resist the dehumanizing oppression that is their lot.

A deeper look at the philosophical position of Festus Iyayi on violence reveals the following points: Violence is a historical phenomenon. It has a class basis. Surplus value is forcibly extracted and expropriated from the working people by the owners of the means of production. Consequently, Idemudia feels that violence 'consisted not of physical brutal assault but a slow and gradual debasement of himself, his pride as a man' (*Violence* 243). Again, the Counsel for Defense in a drama staged by the poor inmates of the Ogbe Hospital at the occasion of the visit by the State Commissioner of Health says

In my understanding acts of violence are committed when a man is denied the

opportunity of being educated, of getting a job, of feeding himself and his family properly, of getting medical attention cheaply, quickly and promptly. We often do not realize that it is the society, the type of economic and hence the political system which we are operating in our country today that brutalizes the individual, rapes his manhood. We often do not realize that when such men of poor and limited opportunities react, they are only in a certain measure, answering violence with violence. What I would like to see, however, is not just for a handful of men to take up arms to rob one individual. I feel and think it is necessary that all the oppressed sections of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. The system has already proved that it operates through violence .... (*Violence* 185)

Despite the constant presence of class violence pitted against the working people, the latter are portrayed as determined to overcome it within historical limits. At work, in hospitals and at home, the working people face violence of one form or another with courage and resistance.

In sum, poverty is a restrictive and constraining experience and as has already been discussed, people in low-income household experience significant difficulty in gaining access to activities and opportunities due to the cost of participation. The research shows the damaging personal and social effects of poverty, including the ways in which it affected people through restricted opportunities and choices. Poverty imposes heavy demands on people's capacity to cope with everyday economic and social pressures and manage life under severe financial restrictions, though people who experience poverty are striving to be included in the social world.

Essentially, one of the enduring markers of African literature, oral or written, is socio-political commitment. It always reflects and refracts the happenings in society which produces and consumes it. Jaja Rao says that 'truthful and fruitful human experience forms the basis for written expression in any branch

of literature' (qtd.in Olowonmi). This is what African literature has lived up to since inception. In the first stage of its existence it concerned itself with the issue of cultural nationalism, whereby African culture, mores and traditions were glorified. Then came the age of colonialism, marked by political and cultural revolution, and African literature at this stage was used as anti-colonial weapon. In the third and current stage, African literature is inward-looking, chronicling, lampooning and satirizing the misdeeds and misgovernance of the ruling elite. Therefore, literature, according to Emerson is 'a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, and by which we may move it' (xxiv). To Amuta, 'social experience is the primary source of literature' (qtd.in Olowonmi). To Dasyuva, writing about the involvement of the writers in politics makes reference to Achebe who similarly avers that such task is 'a self-imposed responsibility hoisted on the writer by the realities of his existence.'

Thus Iyayi's identification with the plight of the poor in the novel and his subsequent objectification of their social conditions is done in conformity with Mao Tse-Tung's position on literature: Revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses

to propel history forward.... Writers and artists concentrate such everyday phenomenon, typify the contradictions and struggles within them and produce works which awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment (25). In the novel studied is inscribed a visible disruption in social relationships between the elite and the less-privileged. This disruption serves as an indicator of the injustices created by post-colonial power structures that oppress the underclass.

## Conclusion

Poverty imposes heavy demands on people's capacity to cope with everyday economic and social pressures and manage life under severe financial restrictions. Such financial limitations often result in 'doing without' everyday necessities like food, clothing, shelter and utilities. Poverty also means restrictions on social activities, thus hampering the chances the poor have to make and sustain friendships and reduce their opportunities for shared social activities due to the costs of attending social events and the expense of hosting social occasions within their own homes.

However, a key dimension emerging from these accounts is about choice; there is a fundamental lack of choice that is a central experience of poverty because the available can only cover (or might not even cover) essential utilities desired. And when people who are constrained by financial freedom feel that they were just about managing, things crop up that could unbalance budgets. Idemudia in *Violence* thinks that the five naira wage earned from unloading bags of cement would at least provide food for him and his wife while he looks for another paid labour, but ironically the pressures from working all day in empty stomach inflicts him with a new difficulty that unbalances his budget. The little wage he acquires from the nerve-racking job cannot even settle his hospital bill, yet he must be discharged from the hospital. Again, one of the jobbers at the construction site owned by Queen laments that he cannot join the strike called by his fellow jobbers to protest their poor pay because 'he has kids to feed. Six of them and a wife. Then there are my mother, [] brothers and [] sisters' (*Violence* 242). This labourer has similar ordeal as Patrick who has an extra burden that he never planned to have, therefore, the money which is meant to feed his family will be diverted to taking care of his pregnant wife, lamenting woefully that

'failure to earn a few naira this month would be catastrophic' (*Violence* 266).

A review of low-income people's accounts of their lives in the novel reveals the challenges of managing family under conditions of poverty and deprivation. The evidence highlights the pressure that disadvantage brings, making family life at times difficult and uncertain. A family's experiences of poverty are not isolated from other factors in their lives, and complex social, cultural and economic processes and divisions create particular challenges. Family equilibrium can be easily destabilized or undermined by external and internal shocks such as unemployment, sickness, disability and family upheaval. These events create circumstances of change and uncertainty for all families, but the added pressures and restrictions of poverty leave materially deprived families highly vulnerable to instability, homelessness, debt and social exclusion. Evidences from the poor persons in the novels reveal key tensions within their lives as they try to balance conflicting demands within the restrictions of a low income. These include: the challenge of meeting their own needs and meeting their family's needs; the challenge of balancing the costs of meeting everyday needs against the costs of meeting social imperatives, such

as participation in cultural norms and expectations at times of special celebration like Christmas; difficult decisions to be made about buying essential goods or saving for future expenditure – for these characters, even vigilance and strict budgeting cannot make their money go far enough, and the everyday demands of sustaining family life coupled with the sudden appearance of extra needs could result in severe financial problems and debt; poor housing qualities and degraded neighbourhoods affect their health and wellbeing and means that they have difficulties in co-existing peacefully; visible signs of poverty and difference - a lack of the same material goods and clothes as their peers, and an inability to take part in the same social and leisure activities meant that they are fearful of stigma and social isolation.

Exploring the impact of poverty for living under complex economic, social and cultural conditions in the novels under study requires considerable sensitivity throughout the research process. But overall findings from these novels suggest that poverty can permeate every level and aspect of life, confronting and constraining people in a multitude of different ways. It is important in an analysis of this nature to note that low-income people in Nigeria – the referent

country in the novels – live in a relatively wealthy society, and their disadvantaged livelihoods are experienced alongside their more affluent peers. They are people who have the same social and cultural expectations as other members of their society, and are driven by the same social imperatives. They—together with their children—want and need to ‘fit in’ and ‘join in’ with others. As Ridge argues, the children living in poverty are ‘engaged in intense social and personal endeavour to maintain social acceptance and social inclusion within the accepted cultural demands of childhood, a struggle that is defined and circumscribed by the material and social realities of their lives’ (141).

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